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The CIA's ordeal during the '70s made it stronger

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Q&A

William E. Colby, former CIA director

Question: Mr. Colby, you were in charge of the Central Intelligence Agency at a very difficult time, from 1973 to 1976. Do you think the ordeal the CIA endured then resulted in a weaker CIA, a stronger CIA, or one that was minimally damaged?

Answer: I'd say all of the above. The main issue was that we had to update the relationship of CIA with the government and Congress. Our CIA stemmed out of the traditional, tiny spy service that serves the president, king or prime minister and really doesn't have much else to do with the government. We developed an intelligence system which, with its analysts, technology, contribution to policy-making, major operations around the world, was just too big to fit into that mold, so we had to bring it into a normal relationship with the separation of powers under our Constitution. But we did it with a high degree of sensationalism and uproar, which, without question, hurt. It caused a lot of foreigners to doubt that Americans were really serious about these things or could keep secrets. But we gave the CIA a better base for future operations, because now if the CIA gets involved in something that becomes controversial, it's pretty clear that it acted with the support of the president and Congress.

Q: When you say operations, do you mean covert operations?

A: Yes. Three examples out of the public print obviously received general consensus that they were a good idea: aid to the Afghan rebels, aid to the Cambodian resistance, and aid to Savimbi in Angola. None of these was terribly secret, but none caused much problem because there was a consensus. There was not a consensus with regard to the *Contras* in Nicaragua, and we've had an enormous uproar about them.

Q: Will the relatively new notification requirements cause you any concern?

A: Some, but you have to do it. Congress has taken a rather amusing position in inserting in the rules that it will not have to approve the operations, but it does say that it has to be informed. That was not adequately done in the Iran-*Contra* instance. But the fact is that if they're informed they can stop actions, as they did in Angola with the Boland amendments. By not stopping them they essentially acquiesce.

Q: Isn't the flip side of that the danger that a member of the intelligence committee who strongly opposes a covert operation can expose it to stop it?

A: It's possible, but he doesn't have to. I had a conversation with a congressman one time, and he asked, "What can we do when you tell us and we don't like it?" I said. "Congressman, you can do lots of things. You can object to it and I will report your objection to the president. You can get a vote of the committee, and that will certainly arouse attention. You can even develop a resolution which essentially bars the action, as in the Boland case. Or if the director insists on going ahead, you can just write down in his little notebook the figure $30 million that's coming off his next year's appropriation, and I guarantee that will catch his attention.

Q: How much leakage of secrets has there been from these congressmen?

A: Not very much. Congressmen will tell you that the executive leaks more than they do, which isn't saying a lot. Newsmen frequently will tell you that the major leaks come out of the administration trying to manipulate the press. Some things do leak out, but that's a cost of running our kind of government, and I think our kind of government has enormous strengths that compensate for those costs. I made a deal with the chairman during the (1970s) investigations. I said, "Look, I'm not going to contest your constitutional right to know

everything here because, that's going to get us nowhere. But I am going to convince you that there are certain things you don't need to know and shouldn't know, primarily the names of the people that work with us around the world. You don't need those names. I don't know them either, and I don't want to know them, because I don't need to know them." We made the deal and conducted a year of civil investigations without names.

Q: To what extent did the "scandals" of the 1970s damage the CIA's information-sharing relationships with other intelligence services around the world?

A: We had very clear situations where foreign intelligence services began to clam up. In other situations individuals who had been our agents came to us and said they couldn't work with us anymore because they couldn't trust us to protect them and their families. We did lose, but I don't think this was a mortal wound to us.

Q: How close is the relationship between the director of the CIA and the president?

A: It depends on the director and on the president. With Casey and Reagan it was quite close. With Helms and Johnson, Helms was a member of Johnson's so-called "Tuesday lunch," in which about eight of the senior officers in Defense, State and the rest would gather once or twice a week to coordinate the security effort. In my case, with Nixon, it wasn't terribly close. I saw him when I had something important or in a meeting, but he was inclined to work through his staff, through Kissinger. With Ford it was a little more frequent and more normal.

Q: What about Bush and Webster? How do you feel about Bush's decision to retain Webster?

A: I think it was a good thing to retain him. I suspect that Bush, having been there, knows the job very well and has respect for what the agency can do. He also will be conscious of the need to keep Congress informed on what the agency is doing. I think Bush approaches it as getting a team to work together. He is not a great ideologue — he's not going to march out with a flag flying all by himself.

Q: Given the closeness between Casey and President Reagan, are you persuaded that Reagan had no knowledge of the aid to the *Contras* through the sale of weapons to Iran?

A: Here I speak from the public print again. Mr. Reagan apparently started off almost every meeting saying, "What can we do more for the *Contras*, and what can we do for our hostages?" That's going to generate a certain amount of activity among his subordinates — you know, the old Henry II thing of who will rid me of this turbulent priest, and four of his knights go over and slice up Thomas á Becket in Canterbury Cathedral. Did the king ask for it? No. Was it in line with what he wanted to happen? Yes. I think the Tower Commission was very accurate with respect to Reagan's very relaxed management style. He didn't want to know the details. But I think he is responsible, whether he knew the details or not.

Q: Some argue that the prosecution of Oliver North, Admiral Poindexter and others amounts to a sort of political act, if you will — not simply ferreting out suspected breakers of the law, but criminalizing a difference between the president and Congress on foreign policy. What's your feeling on that?

A: There is a statute that puts it as "Thou shalt not lie to Congress." That isn't what it says exactly, but that's what it means. And there are criminal penalties involved. Anybody is under the gun of not lying to Congress, and that's what Mr. North in his immune testimony said he did. I think that is totally unacceptable. You can't run a government that way. Mr. Poindexter made a point of not telling the president what he was doing. What kind of subordinate is that?

Q: At the end of the 1970s there were some celebrated intelligence failures — for example, the failure in Iran to anticipate the Islamic revolution, the failure to anticipate that the Soviets were preparing to invade Afghanistan. Would you blame difficulties like those on the investigative process of the mid-'70s?

A: I wouldn't blame them fully on the investigations, but I think they probably had an influence. If you cuff a group of people around for several years continuously, you reduce their drive and, certainly, their willingness to take risks on certain things.

Q: Which is a way of saying the morale of the CIA declined as a result?

A: Sure it did. One of George Bush's major contributions was that he picked them up, put them back to work, and gave them a sense of dignity and appreciation for what they were doing. He is very highly regarded for that within the CIA. As for the Iranian thing, I think it wasn't a collection problem but an analysis or perception problem of the strength of the Islamic fundamentalism. Certainly, the Ayatollah made no secret of his intentions. I think the agency was fairly well informed in its psychological assessment of the shah, that he really was not a very strong man and wouldn't react all that well under pressure.

On the Afghan thing, I'm not sure you're right. We saw the troops gathering at the frontier, the troubles the Soviets were having with their puppet regime, and we were following it fairly carefully. I wasn't in it then, so I'm just working off the press reports, but the silly thing was President Carter's remark — at which I was absolutely aghast — that he had learned more about the Soviets in the previous two weeks than he ever knew before. That bespeaks a man who never heard of Hungary or Czechoslovakia — it just doesn't make any sense.

Q: To what extent have our problems with developing a reliable launch capability compromised our intelligence gathering?

A: Again I am speaking totally off the public print. As I understand it, we lucked out after the Challenger disaster when some of our devices lasted a little longer than they were programmed to and got us out of a bit of a jam. We're all right now, apparently. We've got some new stuff up. There was an argument in the early '70s as to whether we ought to put all our eggs in the space shuttle basket, and the decision by the government at that time was that the only way to justify the shuttle operation was to put all our eggs in it. Some of the Air Force and intelligence people did object at the time and were overridden. Now we're going back to having a variety of launch vehicles, and I think that is the only way to do it.

Q: The debate over human intelligence gathering versus advanced technology seems to be increasing. Have humans somehow been downgraded?

A: Yes and no. The technological dimension of intelligence has revolutionized the business in the last 25 years, and, obviously, that changes the whole picture. But does it mean that you don't need a human agent to tell you something about the internal political dynamics of the Politburo? No, it doesn't. You need that if you have a society that operates in secret and those secrets can be dangerous to our society.

Q: What do you think is the proper balance between collection of electronic intelligence or technological intelligence, collection of human intelligence and use of covert or paramilitary operations.

A: It's hard to tell about the question of human or technological. There is no way you can put things up in the sky with any precision without spending a lot of money. With the human thing, you're not going to spend that much money. It's training, it's competent people, it's having them in different parts of the world. The hardest problem we face is cover. When we have a society that says, "Thou shall not use missionaries, thou shall not use journalists, thou shall not use academics, thou shall not use the Peace Corps, thou shall not use a whole bundle of other people, who the hell is left? If you go abroad with a nice little thing on your hatband saying "I am CIA," you're not going to accomplish very much. Use of covert operations is going to respond to an administration's attitude and to the situation we face in the world — if we face a major threat and the administration wants to respond to it, we'll have some big projects. If we don't face any threats we probably won't do very much.

Q: There have been reports that we have relied on people like Manuel Noriega of Panama and, in the case of Mexico, Miguel Nazar Haro, who was head of the Federal Judicial Police and was indicted for stealing cars in Los Angeles. Is that a problem?

A: Noriega was the intelligence officer in Panama, and so was Omar Torrijos before him. Obviously, you're going to have some relationship with him, and get what you can. Does that mean you're going to depend on him totally? No. You're going to develop such other sources as you think you need according to the importance of the problem. As for the Mexican thing, I just don't know enough about the man or the details to answer.

Q: Without getting into details or going beyond your knowledge, do we get so tied up in folks like these that we can't back off?

A: Obviously, you have to weigh some counterveiling values one way or the other, but the answer is no, we don't get totally tied to them. But you're not going to run a bunch of Boy Scouts around the world as your agents. You'll have all sorts of people. But particularly when you get into seamy areas, you're going to need people who are fairly seamy.

Q: What can you tell us about CIA recruiting. What sort of individuals does the agency seek?

A: It depends on what their job is to be. We have four basic career patterns. One is science or technology, and we obviously want very good engineers, electrical or whatever kind are needed to work some of these devices that we either send up in the sky or use on the ground. Another category is analysts who receive the information and consider what it means. There you want people with advanced degrees in history, economics or something like that. Then you've got administrators for personnel, finance, logistics and so forth. And then there are the operations types who go abroad, get to know foreigners and speak their language, and try to understand what's happening.

Q: There is an individual who was trained by the CIA to work in the Soviet Union despite some very strange things in his personal history which the CIA knew about. In the end, this individual defected and is now in the Soviet Union. A lot of people wondered how the CIA could be seemingly so sloppy in its personnel practices. I know it didn't happen on your watch, but how can you explain something like that?

A: Let's remember the difficulty of cover, particularly in going behind the Iron Curtain. Obviously, you don't want people who are identified as intelligence officers. You want somebody whose background will stand up to a hostile look. Now this guy had no intelligence connection whatsoever. We ran him through the tests and the polygraph and learned that he had used drugs, but he said he had stopped. Before he left we put him through the polygraph again and it bounced. He had continued to used drugs. We said no, he's not going to the Soviet Union because of that. Then the problem is what do you do with him. We helped him get a job in New Mexico, as I remember. We offered him psychological counseling to try to help him readjust. He was bitter about having been bounced, and finally he decided to contact the Soviets. We were tipped to his plans by Yurchenko, the defector, but he slipped the FBI and ran away. A bad show, yes, but let's get something in perspective. Out of the 40 years of CIA history, that is our first defector to the Soviet Union. That is not a bad record.

Q: How much harm did it do?

A: Apparently, and I don't know this for sure, he did enough harm to finger an officer in the Soviet Ministry of Aviation, who was executed. That's quite a lot.

Q: You mentioned Yurchenko, which leads to another question. Wasn't that poorly handled by the CIA?

A: No. The fact is that any of these defectors can just tell us they want to go home and they go home. Were not going to hold them here. Yurchenko was debriefed and told us things like this other case and a few other things quite significant. And then, like a number of defectors, he went through a psychological crisis while we were doing the usual process of trying to get him adjusted to life here. He may have thought that we operate like the KGB and wouldn't let him go, so he ran away to the Soviet embassy. If he wanted to go the Soviet embassy all he had to do was say so.

Q: What happens to a Yurchenko when he goes back?

A: Yurchenko has been seen, I think, on one occasion in Moscow. I doubt that he's going have a very high responsibility, but one of the things he will do is give lectures to fellow members of the KGB not to defect, because the Americans will just squeeze you and throw you away. I think they will try to keep him alive, incidentally, to knock off any accusations that they execute such people.

Q: In a case like Libya, you didn't mention among intelligence objectives any desire to see covert operations that might foment Gadhafi's ouster.

A: I don't have any problem with it if you can do it, but I'd be fairly careful about how I did it. You can't beat something with nothing. If you're going to bring about a change like that — or help bring it about, because that's what you really do — you have to find somebody to help and build them up. That takes a long time.

Q: We did that in Vietnam, didn't we?

A: No, that's what we didn't do. I'm just finishing a book on Vietnam, I've spent a long time over there. One of the things on the Diem thing is that I don't remember a serious conversation as to who would follow him, which is just nutty. If you're going to get rid of somebody, at least have some idea who will take over. And how anyone could have thought that the generals were going to have a more democratic society than good old Mandarin Diem I don't know. I think the biggest disaster we had in Vietnam was the overthrow of Diem.

Q: What else went wrong?

A: The overall approach was best expressed by Mac Bundy one time when I said, "Look, why don't we stop talking about what we're going to bomb and how many soldiers we're going to send? Why don't we talk about how we get the villages organized to resist the Viet Cong, because that's the real problem. And he said I might be right, but the structure of the American government probably wouldn't allow that. When we first got in trouble there in the early '60s, we floundered around with a military approach, and our military essentially anticipated a revision of the Korean War, which anybody who had read anything about Ho Chi Minh or the French experience knew wasn't going to happen. That was error one.

Q: You mean in the way we advised the South Vietamese and structured their armed forces?

A: Yes. Our whole argument was to raise the South Vietnamese army from 150,000 to 170,000. Meanwhile, the local forces, the territorial forces, were about a total of 70,000 and there was no home guard. Now when the British won in Malaya, they had about 80,000 troops, about 80,000 police and 400,000 home guards. Next came the strategic hamlet program — it didn't work all that well, but at least it took the initiative of trying to build something at the bottom. And then we got mad at Diem, overthrew him and created total chaos. Poor President Johnson had no choice but either to accept defeat or send in the American forces.

Q: Then what happened?

A: When you send American forces into something, they're going to look around for the enemy — to fight and finish the enemy. But they couldn't find them because the communist strategy was to avoid combat, and just get at the populace. So we insisted on fighting what was familiar to us, a soldiers' war, while the enemy was pulling the rug out from under us. Eventually, we built up our forces to 500,000. Finally, we got ourselves cranked around, thanks to President Johnson, who put Robert Komer in to get something going in what he called the other war. Komer put together an organization of civilians and military to conduct pacification, and with that we increased the territorials to about 400,000 and handed out about 500,000 weapons to home guard, changed the whole balance of force, and proceeded to win. Then Tet came along and was grossly misunderstood, because really it was a communist defeat. But it turned the American people off. President Nixon had to get the troops out.